

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Briefing
on
Human Rights in Bangladesh: An Update**

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Virtual Event**

**Statement of Kristi Ueda
Donald M. and Susan N. Wilson Fellow
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights**

As seen in the lead up to the last election in 2018, the Government of Bangladesh has continued its efforts to close civic space ahead of the January 2024 election through its targeting of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, journalists, and others considered critical of the government. These individuals and their families have been subjected to retaliatory arrests, harassment, and intimidation by state officials, who have enjoyed impunity for their misconduct.

Freedom of expression and free press continue to erode in Bangladesh. Already in the first half of 2023, prominent Bangladeshi human rights organization Odhikar has documented 151 attacks on journalists. In addition to individually targeting journalists, the government has attacked media outlets, ordering the closure of 191 websites it accused of publishing “anti-state news” in January 2023 and forcing the main political opposition party’s newspaper to halt operations in February 2023 after canceling its printing license on tenuous grounds. The government’s attempts to stifle critical voices have become increasingly brazen, with the Prime Minister criticizing the nation’s leading daily newspaper, calling it “an enemy” to her party, the Awami League, “an enemy of democracy,” and “an enemy of the country’s people” after the newspaper published a report on high food prices. The report’s author and the newspaper’s editor were charged for allegedly “undermining the country’s independence.”

The government also continues to target and discredit Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus and his anti-poverty work, with the Prime Minister stating that he should be plunged into a river to teach him a lesson and the recent indictment of him and other Grameen Telecom board members by the Anti-Corruption Commission to tarnish his internationally recognized poverty-alleviation work.

In addition, the Government of Bangladesh has severely curtailed the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. The treatment of Odhikar is emblematic of the ongoing targeting of human rights defenders and organizations for doing their important work. Since 1994, Odhikar has been a leader in monitoring and reporting on human rights violations in Bangladesh, such as arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture. Odhikar’s leaders, Mr. Adilur Rahman Khan and Mr.

ASM Nasiruddin Elan, continue to be prosecuted and to face judicial harassment in a 10-year long case based on the government's trumped-up allegations that they had published "fake, distorted, and defamatory" material for cooperating with the United Nations, publishing a fact-finding report on extrajudicial killings, and reporting on excessive use of force to disperse a protest in Bangladesh in 2013.

In addition to targeting its leaders, the Government of Bangladesh has interfered with Odhikar's operations by leaving its application for registration renewal pending since 2014. After almost eight years of inaction, in early February 2022, just months after the United States designated sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion and its leaders, the government sent Odhikar a letter requesting the names and addresses of everyone killed extrajudicially and disappeared between 2009 and 2021. Then, in June 2022, the government deregistered Odhikar as an organization, stating that the organization had published "misleading information" on extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances in Bangladesh that had "seriously tarnished the image of the state to the world" and "created various issues" for the country.

However, it is the Bangladeshi government's failure to investigate and hold perpetrators accountable for human rights violations rather than Odhikar's reporting of these violations that has tarnished the country's reputation.

International civil society organizations, including Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, where I work, as well as the organizations of my esteemed co-panelists, have continued to publicly condemn the dire human rights situation in Bangladesh, but have been met with denial and deflection from Bangladeshi authorities. When United Nations human rights experts have written letters expressing their concerns over the harassment and smear campaigns against Odhikar, the government responded by accusing Odhikar leader, Mr. Khan, of "[playing] [victim] by fabricating a story involving law enforcement...[and] intelligence [agencies]" and expressing disappointment at the repetitive nature of the allegations.

Other human rights organizations that have similarly and courageously reported on such abuses by the government have also been retaliated against. The Bangladeshi government's insistence on silencing those who speak out instead of acknowledging and addressing the human rights violations they have exposed has become routine. When discussing the U.S. sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion and its officials, in March 2023, the Prime Minister herself has assured the battalion not to worry about the imposed sanctions and that the government will identify those who "tarnish" and "defame" Bangladesh and uncover their motivations. The following month, her Security Adviser accused international organizations of working with insiders to disband the battalion as part of a conspiracy.

Bangladeshi civil society welcomed the U.S. sanctions and called for further sanctions to urge their government to implement much-needed reforms on security forces and stop the violations. We believe that until impartial and effective accountability mechanisms are adopted by the Government of Bangladesh to investigate and address such violations, the United States must not lift the existing sanctions and must consider additional sanctions against other security forces, such as the Detective Branch and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, that partake in similar violations throughout Bangladesh. The United States must emphasize to Bangladesh that should they want to address the human rights violations underlying the

sanction designations, then going after those who are documenting and exposing these violations instead of holding perpetrators accountable does nothing positive for their human rights record.

The United States must stress that an open civic space is necessary for a functioning democracy, especially in the lead up to the January 2024 election. Bangladesh must ensure an enabling environment for journalists, human rights defenders, and organizations to conduct their important work without fear of harassment, intimidation, and reprisals.

Thank you very much for your attention. I remain at your disposal for any questions.